

INVESTIGATING ‘CHURNALISM’ IN REAL-TIME NEWS

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Popularized by industry insider Nick Davies, ‘churnalism’ refers to the recycling of prepackaged public relations and press agency copy as news. In *Flat Earth News*, Davies (2008: 59) paints a bleak picture of “journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false.” Davies’ narrative is one of seemingly irreversible decline. Corporate interests have grown profit margins at the expense of staff numbers and news quality. Industrial concentration, uncertain labor conditions, standardization, and digital media technologies have caused fewer journalists to serve more media. Journalists themselves are no longer committed to uncovering truths. Instead, they rely on second-hand information and spread pseudo-news. Almost certainly a diagnosis of a terminal illness.

Davies’ feather ruffling book, billed and received as a dog eat dog attack on journalism, is largely based on a study of UK print journalism (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin, 2008a). To verify the causality of ready-made source material in news reporting, the authors performed keyword-based content analyses of two single-week samples comprising 2,207 newspaper stories of UK domestic news and their respective public relations and news agency source materials. The study found that no less than 70 percent of all articles published in UK print journalism rely to varying degrees on prepackaged information. This source reliance was attributed to four interconnected ‘rumors’ which, taken together, contextualize changes in UK print journalism: (i) journalists have become news processors instead of generators; (ii) market demands force smaller workforces to produce more output; (iii) journalists have become less wary of PR copy; and (iv) editorial independence in UK newsrooms has decreased. The authors back up these claims with employment figures, profit margins and pagination patterns at UK national newspapers, and interview data. Lewis, Williams, and Franklin (2008a: 29–30) found that:

approximately half (49 percent) of news stories published in the quality press and analysed for this study were wholly or mainly dependent on materials produced and distribute [sic] by wire services with a further fifth (21 percent) of stories containing some element of agency copy.

Furthermore, journalistic reliance on PR materials (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin, 2008a: 30):

is similarly striking with almost a fifth (19 percent) of stories deriving wholly (10 percent) or mainly (9 percent) from PR sources. A further 22 percent were either a mix of PR with other materials (11 percent) or mainly other information (11 percent) while 13 percent of stories appeared to contain PR materials which could not be identified.

These findings provide evidence for the commercialization of news media, increased productivity demands in UK newsrooms, the instrumental role of news subsidies, and evolving editorial standards in print journalism. However, when framed in a narrative of decline that laments the erosion of first-hand reporting and succumbs to romanticizing a bygone era populated by fiercely independent news hounds, we feel that Davies' take on news media is overly pessimistic and ultimately unproductive for understanding digital journalism.

Critical issues

Studies in different national settings have consistently linked higher workloads to increased reliance on prepackaged news sources (e.g. Carsten, 2004; Machill et al., 2006; Reich, 2010). The debate on this development can be seen to spread between two poles, the first one seeing churnalism as a threat to the public service ideal of journalism—the reassuring but lofty idea that journalism safeguards democracies from corruption, falsehood, and malgovernance by exposing wrongdoing, providing unbiased information, and mobilizing the public. For instance, Jackson and Moloney (2015) argue that churnalism is characteristic of the broader 'PR-ization' of the news industry in which 'editorial subsidies' or 'page-ready content'—an updated and more extreme version of 'information subsidies' (see Gandy, 1982)—threaten independent journalism and democratic processes. Such claims are difficult to verify. The dearth of longitudinal studies suggests that we do not have much with which to compare contemporary journalistic practices. A notable exception is Reich's (2014: 363) study of sourcing practices in the Israeli press (studying 2001, 2006 and 2011), which demonstrates that "the changes found are too selective, modest and not always in the expected directions to be considered as a transformation of news routines and practices."

The second pole draws attention to the transition from legacy to digital news media and understands that journalism is no longer exclusively defined by eyewitness reporting. This is not to say that reporting news is considered irrelevant or that journalists no longer self-identify as knowledge mediators. However, the balance is shifting. A recent survey among Belgian journalists shows that 80 percent regularly (41.5 percent) to always (38.4 percent) work in the newsroom, with fieldwork being the exception rather than the norm (Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers, 2015). From this perspective, what Davies disqualifies as churnalism is but one aspect of a changing media ecology in which "newsmaking today is as much about managing multiple fast-moving flows of information already in circulation as it is about locating and sharing 'new' news" (Boyer, 2013: 2). Technological innovations support the transition from traditional, on-the-spot reporting to a combination of filtration and curation of existing information, and, to a lesser extent, slow journalism or long form journalism. Several studies show that journalists churn short news items so they can invest time in desk and field research. In addition, analysis and contextualization of events are increasingly viewed as the main task of journalists, while the direct reporting of facts is 'outsourced' to wire services and PR services (Broersma, 2009; Knight, 2011). This shift towards monitoring,

filtering, and repurposing of content already in circulation forces attention to an understudied yet central aspect of contemporary newsroom praxis: office-based screenwork. In what follows, we discuss data collection procedures and analytic frameworks that have been used to measure reliably or otherwise convincingly study digital news production and sourcing practices.

Main research methods

Two methodological approaches to churnalism can be distinguished in terms of three sets of tensions: (i) offline versus online procedures for data collection; (ii) textual versus participant driven procedures for data analysis; and (iii) empirical breadth and statistical significance versus empirical depth and qualitative insight. The first approach content analyzes news texts by freezing news flows. The focus is on large samples of semiotic material (usually textual) which are then coded, quantified, or qualified. The second approach tracks, documents, and maps news flows across time and space. This approach often uses mixed methods to qualify professional practices from the perspectives of participants or to model the complexity and contingency of news flows in real time. We take both approaches in turn, starting with content analysis.

Freezing the flow

The general aim of content analysis is to make “replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). Quantitative content analysis does so by systematically reducing manifest content to numbers and deriving meaning from this. Qualitative content analysis is equally systematic but reduces textual characteristics to key ideas or topics. For instance, in their study of online news flows, Karlsson and Strömbäck (2009) use content analysis to qualify and quantify the immediacy and interactivity of online news by (i) monitoring story updates using screen shots and manual downloads of front pages; (ii) using software to measure how often new stories appear on the top of the front page; and (iii) counting the number of top stories news sites publish or update during set intervals.

To illustrate how content analysis can be used to study churnalism, we draw on recent research on source reliance in foreign news. A costly and time-consuming endeavor, foreign news is an easy target for cost-cutting and hence churnalism. Indeed, news organizations are increasingly replacing their network of correspondents with home-based journalists who thus largely depend on news agency copy and (to a lesser degree) PR content (Hafez, 2009). Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers (2014) examined the extent to which churnalism occurred in the foreign news output of four Belgian newspapers over a period of 15 years (1995–2010) by quantifying the use of prepackaged media sources (news agency copy and recycled news articles from other media brands) and information subsidies or PR content (press releases, press conferences, information from spokespeople, and corporate websites) in 4,515 foreign news articles. Findings show that news agency copy, recycled news articles, and information subsidies were incorporated in respectively 25, 20.5, and 11.1 percent of the analyzed articles. These numbers are significantly lower than what Lewis, Williams, and Franklin (2008b) report. Differences may be attributed to national contexts (UK versus Belgium), empirical focus (domestic versus foreign news), and methodological approaches.

Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers (2014) used a rather conservative measure of churnalism for reasons of replicability and validity, taking into account only those instances where media sources and information subsidies were explicitly mentioned in the news output.

In contrast, Lewis, Williams, and Franklin (2008b) counted not only those instances where PR materials or agency content were explicitly used but also those cases where a text (fragment) resembled PR. In those cases, researchers were required to follow a number of possible leads to determine whether or not PR played an agenda-setting role. This issue points to an important limitation of quantitative content analysis for the analysis of churnalism. News stories tend to carry few traces of their production process because journalists are expected to produce news and not bother their audiences with a detailed meta-analysis of all steps in the writing process. As a result, quantitative content analysis can only provide a partial overview of sourcing routines.

Conversely, qualitative content analysis provides a means to trace source material in the final news output more comprehensively. Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers (2013) present the findings of an input–output analysis (Lams, 2011), a specific type of qualitative content analysis in which media sources and PR materials (the input) and news articles (the output) are compared. It fits in with the claim of a growing group of researchers that news production is increasingly an ‘outsourced’ practice and that, consequently, news production analysis needs to include the source materials that anticipate the news production process (Dinan and Miller, 2009; Grünberg and Pallas, 2012). This study examined the extent to which 138 press releases from the international NGO *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) published between 1995 and 2010 were adopted in foreign coverage by four Belgian newspapers. The authors traced 105 news articles that bore a clear resemblance to 55 of the 138 press releases (40 percent success rate). This resemblance comprised a verbatim reproduction of (parts of) the press release, but even if no sentences were literally copied and pasted, it was still clear from the overall content or particular point of view that the journalist had used information from the press release. Yet 76 of those 105 articles contained additional news gathering and were primarily (i.e. more than half) written by newspaper or news agency journalists. Moreover, Belgian newspapers integrated fewer MSF press releases in their news output in 2010 than in 1995. This does not necessarily mean that Belgian journalists produced little, and less, churnalism in those 15 years. The study is based on one case and the article sample is too small to generalize the findings. There are several alternative explanations for these findings such as the fact that the competition for news access between NGOs has evolved to the detriment of MSF with new players entering the field. Most importantly, the findings show that churnalism should not be treated as a universal and unstoppable shift towards more prepackaged news but instead represents a more nuanced and moderate evolution in different degrees in various contexts.

Even though the comparison between input and output provides additional insight into the news production process, content analysis is not sufficient to accomplish a full understanding of the context and processes inside and outside the newsroom that influence news gathering and news production such as certain editorial guidelines, social relations and hierarchies in the newsroom, or budgetary considerations. Furthermore, content analysis can show if the journalist has copied and pasted prepackaged information, but it remains unclear how extensively the journalist checked this information against other sources first (Broersma, 2009).

Tracking the flow

A second set of approaches tracks the flow of online news in real time and virtual space. For instance, Kautsky and Widholm (2008: 88) use a screen capture software protocol “to analyse different versions of websites as they appear in sequence, arguing that the versionality of online news opens a window into the text which allows us to peek into the discourse

practice of online news.” They find that CNN’s online news coverage comprises three modes of reporting: establishment, intensification, and closure. A second example is the computer-assisted, fieldwork-driven approach to news production combining newsroom ethnography and applied linguistics (Perrin, 2013; Van Hout, 2015). Rather than keyword searches and judgments on textual overlap between source and target text, this approach studies news production as a process: how it exploits semiotic modes and institutional practices and how it materializes and unfolds over time and space. The material dimension of writing news often goes unnoticed—not in the least because we take the technological mediation of news for granted—but it is ingrained in the design of computer programs, information networks, and software applications, precisely the technologies that shape global information flows and hence the news we consume.

One of the signal strengths of this approach is that it enables the detailed analysis of not just texts but also the social practices around texts (Lillis, 2008) as this involves:

- *news producers*: their engagements with the technologies of production; their social position, sociotechnical role, and status in the newsroom; their personal inclinations;
- *situated encounters*: story meetings; telephone conversations; human–computer interaction; source–media interaction; peer group talk; the material setting of and physical arrangements at particular newsrooms;
- *institutions*: how institutional stakeholders (companies, PR agencies, newswires, and governments) shape, sustain, and are reproduced by the news production process; how these stakeholders ‘manage’ news flows.

Methodologically, a combination of data collection procedures are used to investigate how journalists write from sources in real time. These include computer-assisted writing process data, interviewing, participant observation, and collecting photographs and documents. Some of these procedures are conducted simultaneously, others sequentially. For instance, in his groundbreaking work on news writing, Perrin (2006) developed a three-tiered methodology known as *progression analysis* that tracks the writing process across three sequential phases of production: the situational context of the writing process (or macro level), the movement of writing throughout the composition phase (or meso level), and the writer’s consciously applied revising strategies (or micro level). The macro level contextualizes the writing task in a situational ‘portrait’ by way of standardized interviews and participant observation. The meso level employs S-notation (Kollberg and Severinson-Eklundh, 2001) to map revisions made during the writing process and to visualize those revisions in so-called progression diagrams. The micro level uses an interview protocol for eliciting an ongoing narrative from the authors about their writing, which forms the critical mass for comparing what journalists say about their writing practices and how they write on screen.

Taking a page from Perrin’s methodology, Van Hout (2010, 2015) used a similar methodological combination during his fieldwork at the business desk of a national newspaper in Belgium. To examine how reporters write from sources in real time, he used two software applications. Inputlog (Leijten and Van Waes, 2013) is a keystroke logging tool for Microsoft Windows that records keystrokes, mouse movements, window navigation, and dictated speech. Camtasia Studio® is an online screen recorder that was used to make screen videos of the writing processes. Both applications were used with the informed consent of the journalists in question. Moreover, the software ran in the background and did not interfere with normal computer operations. The writing logs and screen videos were combined with observational, textual, and interview data in an attempt to follow the story from the moment

it entered the newsroom until the moment it was filed for copy-editing. During fieldwork, a four-step data collection protocol was developed.

Story identification

This involves monitoring incoming emails, following the newswires, and attending the newsdesk story meeting to identify stories within the newsbeats of the participating reporters. During the story meeting, a list is kept of the stories that these reporters were or had been assigned.

Reporter confirmation

Immediately following the story meeting, the reporters are asked what stories they are working on and how their assigned stories are sourced. If an assigned story is based on a press release or a newsfeed, the researcher asks for permission to record the writing process and for copies of the source texts.

Data recording and storage

When signaled by the reporter, both software applications are activated from the moment the reporter starts writing until (s)he files the story for copy-editing. The software is then turned off and the logging and screen recording files are stored on the central newsroom server.

Retrospective interviewing

After the writing session was completed, the reporter is asked to comment on the Camtasia screen video during a brief stimulated retrospective interview.

From the data inventory, a core set of 18 news production processes was extracted. Each case was based on prepackaged information such as press releases and press agency copy. Every logged story comprised at least four data files: the Inputlog data file, the Camtasia screen video, an audio file of the retrospective interview, and copies of the source texts. In addition, copies of the story budget (a list of planned stories for that particular day), printouts of the press releases, email messages, and interview notes made by the reporters were included. Rough transcripts were made of the screen videos and the retrospective interviews. Inputlog logging files were also included. Data analysis proceeded inductively and contrastively through “a focused iterative process of data interrogation which aims to interweave the findings that emerge from each dataset” (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 54). This allows for a detailed reconstruction of how reporters accomplish routine writing tasks at speed: how they locate, organize, and ‘trim’ selected source texts; how they source, naturalize, copy, and add information; and how they revise the text-produced-so-far to ‘knock’ the story into shape. These accounts naturalize churnalism as a “reproductive process in which professionals contribute to glocalised news-flows by transforming source texts into public target texts” (Perrin, 2013: 54).

The wider theoretical relevance of this sort of knowledge remains important not only to document how journalism is changing but also to understand what can be gained and lost from a move to a fully fledged digital journalism (Van Hout, 2015). The methodology of real-time tracking and virtual lurking highlights the writing process as an under-researched, but, as a result of keystroke logging software, researchable feature of journalistic practice in real time. The trade-off lies in the amount of data this approach generates, and hence the time it takes to analyze the different types of data.

Recommendations for future directions

Despite the central role of sources in the news production process, Broersma and Graham (2012: 406) underline that sourcing is an under-researched practice especially when it comes to “the conventions of how sources are included in news texts.” Researchers have mainly employed content analysis and ethnographic studies to meet this criticism, but both approaches have limitations. Qualitative content analysis and ethnographic research are too labor-intensive to be executed on a large scale, and moreover, some exchanges between journalists and sources, such as phone calls, are unobservable (Reich, 2014). Quantitative content analysis of news sourcing is equally labor-intensive and delivers limited return-on-investment as it only provides insight in explicit uses of sources and churnalism (Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers, 2014). However, in the current digital environment, many tasks that are performed manually can be automated to save time. Like journalism, academic research is adapting to the new digital environment and experimenting with new opportunities for data collection and data analysis:

The automation of many tasks in news content analysis will not replace the human judgement needed for fine-grained, qualitative forms of analysis, but it allows researchers to focus their attention on a scale far beyond the sample sizes of traditional forms of content analysis. Rather than spending precious labour on the coding phase of raw data, analysts could focus on designing experiments and comparisons to test their hypotheses, leaving to computers the task of finding all articles of a given topic, measuring various features of their content such as their readability, use of certain forms of language, sources, etc. (Flaounas et al., 2012: 111; see also Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida, 2013).

Reconstruction interviews, developed in detail by Reich (2009, 2010, 2014) are probably the best method for analyzing news sourcing in a quantitative manner. Journalists are asked to describe in detail how a relatively large sample of their own, recent articles was produced “answering a series of questions regarding every contribution made by every type of source, textually and orally, inside the newsroom or outside, etc.” (Reich, 2010: 804). The interviewer uses a registration form so that the journalists’ sourcing routines and the inputs of different sources can be systematically reconstructed for each article and for each journalist. To minimize socially desirable answers, sources are detached from specific articles and assigned to categories such as ‘PR practitioner’ or ‘senior official.’ This creates an open climate in which journalists may be less reluctant to talk about churnalism practices (Reich, 2010, 2014).

In sum, it is essential to look beyond the potential of individual research methods for future studies of churnalism. Considering the dynamic and increasingly complex nature of news sourcing, we underwrite the call for more mixed-method research (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). The integration and combination of traditional and innovative, online and offline research methods will yield a more complete understanding of sourcing practices in the era of screenwork.

Further reading

This chapter was inspired by Lewis, Williams, and Franklin’s political economy of UK print journalism (2008a, 2008b) and by Jackson and Moloney’s (2015) interview study of UK PR professionals’ views on media technology, change, and power. Boyer (2011) provides an

insightful behind-the-scenes look at ‘slotting,’ or incoming news filtering, in a German news agency. Van Hout and Macgilchrist’s (2010) follow a news story from its entry in the newsroom through the review process during a story meeting and the writing process up to the point the story is filed for copy-editing. Reich (2014) presents a longitudinal study of sourcing practices in the Israeli press using face-to-face reconstruction interviews. A complete reading of this research method is available in Reich (2009).

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